Social Planning Council of Winnipeg

POVERTY BAROMETER

December 2001

HAPPY HOLIDAYS:

For some, the holiday season is not a happy time

THE SEASON'S UNTOLD STORIES....

The following vignettes, based on the experience of Winnipeg Harvest, illustrate the pressures facing poor and working poor families at this time of year:

Sarah sets a holiday budget, but overspends every year because she feels that she must return the generosity of those who unexpectedly give her gifts.

Fran could set and keep her budget if it were not for additional obligations, such as the Christmas party and gift exchange at her work place.

John and Sherry have budgeted to eat one meal a day in order to buy their children gifts this year. Their children see what the holidays are like for their friends, and John and Sherry really want to make this time of year as "normal" as possible for their children.

At this time of year, people go beyond their budgets to make the holidays special. The holiday season is a particularly distressing time for poor and working poor families who experience difficulty making ends meet throughout the year. Their budgets, like an elastic band, are stretched in December, and snap back into place in the New Year, often accompanied by the additional burden of increased personal debt.

With each holiday season, many families have to rely on community organizations, such as Winnipeg Harvest, in order to have sufficient food to eat as more of their funds are being spent on trying to keep up with the additional demands that the festive season brings.

FACTS WE ALL SHOULD KNOW:

- Winnipeg Harvest supplies food to over 230 food programs throughout Manitoba.
- Approximately 37,840 Manitobans use a food program once a month. (A food program is any program that provides food products to individuals, such as food banks.)
- Twenty percent of food programs specifically target the needs of children, and over 45 percent of all food shared by Winnipeg Harvest is eaten by children.
- Approximately 16,000 Manitoba households receive between 2-4 days worth of food every two weeks from food programs.
- Many parents have shared with Winnipeg Harvest staff that they routinely eat one meal a day so their children can eat three.
- Last year, over 20,000 Christmas hampers were delivered to Manitoban families by Winnipeg Harvest and other community organizations.

(Source: Winnipeg Harvest, 2001)

Access to Nutritional Food is a Problem for Many Families Throughout the Year

People's inability to access nutritional food is referred to as food insecurity. Food insecurity ranges from an individual worrying about having enough money to buy food, to compromising the quality of the food purchased, to not having enough food to eat.

A Statistic's Canada (2001) report entitled "Food Security in Canadian Households" served to illustrate the large number of Canadians that do not have sufficient food to eat throughout the year and not just during the holidays. Here are some of their major findings:

- In 1998/99, 10% of Canadians, or about 3 million people, were living in food insecure households.
- Some groups have higher odds of experiencing food insecurity, such as low-income households, households depending on social assistance, lone-parent families headed by women, tenants, children and Aboriginal people.
- In 1998/99, about 14% of children under 18 resided where there had been at least one instance of food insecurity.
- Food insecurity has serious consequences and has been associated with poor health, chronic health conditions and depression.

What Can We Do?

There are some simple ways that we can make this festive season truly happy for everyone. Here are some suggestions:

- Try to eliminate situations that require the people around us to spend extra money during the holidays.
- Give our time and money to support community organizations that help people make a positive difference in their lives.
- Remember that the problems facing poor and working poor families do not disappear once the holidays are over.
- Spread the holiday spirit throughout the year by giving our time and money to those most in need.

What Can Government Do?

- Increase the minimum wage to a level that provides a valid living wage for families.
- Support community economic development initiatives, such as the Christmas Light Campaign, as a means of addressing long-term poverty.
- Eliminate the clawback of the National Child Benefit Supplement to families on social assistance with children over the age of six.

POVERTY BAROMETER is an occasional publication of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg.
The mission of the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg is to provide action-oriented leadership in social planning and effecting social policy changes.
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